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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings of a study examining the nature of collaboration between special educators and general educators in two elementary schools. In addition, personal perspectives are presented on the linkages between conducting research and gaining experiences as a special educator at one of the elementary schools the year following completion of the research. The two elementary schools had three special education teachers serving students with speech and language disabilities, learning disabilities, and mild to moderate mental disabilities. Two forms of collaboration, consultation and cooperative teaching, were the primary areas of investigation. Observations were undertaken with 7 special educators and 11 general educators. Fifteen teachers were also interviewed. Results indicated that consultation occurred informally in these schools in hallways and teacher work areas, due to lack of time to schedule meetings. Additional barriers were teacher personality traits and misunderstandings about roles. Seven themes were identified dealing with the characteristics of collaboration and the meanings and beliefs of teachers regarding collaborative relationships. Teachers viewed consultation as effective for solving problems and gaining emotional support and a better understanding of students. (Contains 11 references.) (SW)

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# Collaboration Between Special Educators and General Educators: The Perspective of a Researcher Turned Teacher-Researcher

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## Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was threefold: (a) To present a summary of my research on the nature of collaboration between special educators and general educators in two elementary schools, (b) to identify linkages between my research and experiences as a special educator working in one of the schools the year immediately following the completion of her research, and (c) to encourage educators to use these results to improve practice.

Traditionally, classroom teachers have spent the majority of their time with their students working alone in separated environments. However, different forces are presently placing increasing demands on teachers to work together (Gerber, 1987; Sailor, 1991; Will, 1986). Regulations governing the field of special education require that the general classroom be first considered when determining where services should be provided.

The research for my dissertation focused on the experiences of teachers as they attempted to collaborate in order to meet the increasingly diverse needs of their students. Twelve themes emerged from the corpus data in the original investigation. A summary of the entire dissertation is found in Appendix A. This paper centers on the seven themes dealing with the characteristics of collaboration and the meanings and beliefs teachers held regarding collaborative relationships (See Appendix B).

Although writers on the theory and practice of collaboration touted organized, agenda-driven consultation as being the most effective and efficient approach, consultation as it was practiced in these schools was much less formal and more serendipitous. It occurred literally on the run as teachers met in the hallways, in the teachers' work areas and in brief moments when students did not require the teachers' full attention. The single greatest reason for the spontaneous nature of consultation was the lack of available time to schedule more formal meetings. In addition to time constraints, teacher personality and misunderstandings about roles were also barriers.

This study supported the barriers identified by others (Idol & West, 1987; Phillips & McCullough, 1990).

Cooperative teaching arrangements and teachers' understanding of cooperative teaching were as varied as the teachers who participated in them or talked about them. Educators in this study found their co-teaching relationships with other teachers empowering and useful in gaining insights into their students' needs. Bauwens, Hourcade & Friend (1991) identified three types of cooperative teaching arrangements between special educators and general educators, but other writers described cooperative teaching in less defined categories (Meyers, Gelzheiser, and Yelich, 1991; Nowacek, 1992).

The follow-up to the investigation occurred during the 1993-94 school year when I worked as a special educator in one of the research sites. As I assumed the role of teacher-researcher, I spent a portion of each day working in classrooms and daily consulted with general educators regarding students on my caseload x. The data collected in this phase of the investigation was based in part on my own recollections of personal experiences and their relationship to the observations, interviews and emerging themes in the original study.

As a new teacher in the school, I decided it was important to first establish rapport with the teachers and then develop a mutually agreeable consultation style. I was learning how to function in a new position and teach elementary students for the first time in my teaching career, in addition to being a "recovering doctoral student." I spent the first two months working long days, often finding myself the last person to leave the building except for the principal, who seemed to live on site.

When I reviewed the themes on consultation which emerged during the course of my dissertation research and compared them to my own teaching experiences, I found that they were very similar. I often found myself talking quickly with fellow teachers outside their classroom doors or on the way to some school event because of the press of teaching responsibilities. I did not attempt to follow any type of agenda or

sequential problem-solving steps as suggested in the literature on collaboration (Graden & Bauer; Idol & West, 1991; Knachendaffel, Robinson, Deshler & Schumacher, 1992). However, I often felt that the discussions would have moved forward more effectively if we had first created an agenda. The time constraints were continually an overshadowing barrier. Because of the lack of time, we often engaged in fire-engine consultation techniques--dealing with the most pressing issues which probably could have been less crisis oriented if we had time to plan earlier. My research and the literature also identified the lack of time as a significant barrier to effective consultation (Idol & West, 1987; Phillips & McCullough, 1990). It was clear to me after my first few months that it would be challenging to change the spontaneous nature of consultation without a change in how scheduling occurred. In fact, such a change has occurred during the 1994-95 year because of an inclusion grant proposal award to this school to enhance the inclusion of students with mild to moderate mental disabilities in their neighborhood schools. Teachers are presently meeting to discuss methods and materials which will enhance inclusive education. However, the suggested agenda-driven consultation techniques are still not being used. I do believe this approach does have value and can be successfully used when consultation time is part of the daily or weekly work routine.

Teacher personality played a significant role in my involvement with teachers. I assumed the role of assistant and/or observer during my first months. First I would talk personally with a teacher regarding a student on my caseload. Then I would offer to spend time in the classroom. Some relationships began immediately and continued with little change throughout the school year. The most significant change in service resulted after the school counselor and I received a small grant for materials to use in a fourth grade classroom where there were many children who needed individual help. After initially working with a small group of students or 1:1 as the teacher suggested, I began to teach a writing curriculum which uses a direct instruction approach. It involved whole-group instruction with hands-on practice during the time I was in the

classroom. Although I had hoped we would teach together, the classroom teacher preferred that I "take over" the class for that period of time. We had planned to continue the program in fifth grade the following year, because the students were making excellent progress. However, staff changes in both general educators and special educators and different grouping decisions terminated the program this year.

At the end of the school year I was spending about 20% of my time in classrooms involved in co-teaching relationships. Each arrangement varied and was highly dependent on the teachers and students in the classrooms, which was similar to what I had observed during my study and was corroborated in the literature (Bauwens, et. al, 1989; Nowacek, 1992). Every teacher I approached was open to this idea; problems with scheduling time created some barriers. What I discovered was that I learned a great deal about teaching and about my students when I went into classrooms. Because of my first-hand knowledge about classroom environments, my conversations with teachers were much more efficient and supportive of the challenges they face daily. This experience was similar to that of participants in my study and in the literature (Friend & Cook; 1992; Nowacek, 1992).

After I left this position at the end of the school year, I have had informal conversations with the principal. Children with mild to moderate disabilities (EMH) who had been educated in cluster sites had been returned to their neighborhood schools. This elementary school also continued as a cluster site for primary students with moderate disabilities (TMH). As a result, the first grade classrooms had a larger than natural proportion of students with special needs. The classroom teachers often had several adults in their classroom at the same time, and the principal indicated they were feeling overwhelmed by the demands of students, scheduling, and consulting. She analyzed the student population in one room and discovered that only one child did not have some type of label or service, ranging from multiple services for a student with moderate disabilities to a gifted child who received occasional pull-out special

events for gifted students. As a result of these extensive needs, another classroom was formed so that the student body in each first-grade classroom could be reduced.

In conclusion, my experiences during the 1993-94 school year supported the themes emerging from my research for the most part. The added dimension I brought to the workplace was an understanding of the process of change, knowledge of the literature on consultation and cooperative teaching along with a strong desire to work in general education settings. My role as teacher-researcher was extremely challenging because of the press of daily instruction with no available time for reflection. It was also difficult to maintain an objective eye because of the close involvement with teachers and students.

## Appendix A

A DESCRIPTIVE INQUIRY INTO COLLABORATION:
GENERAL EDUCATORS AND SPECIAL EDUCATORS
IN TWO ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Noell Hamann Reinhiller
University of North Dakota, 1993

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of collaboration between special educators and general educators in two elementary schools. Traditionally, classroom teachers have spent the majority of their time with their students working alone in separated environments. However, different forces are presently placing increasing demands on the role of teachers. The relatively young field of special education is redefining its interpretation of the concept of least restrictive environment to be the classroom as the first choice for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Increased diversity in the school-age population has resulted in a heterogeneous group of students filling the classrooms in our schools. Teachers daily face the dilemma of not only teaching a population of students with greater and divergent needs, but are also being asked to change how they teach and with whom they teach. In order to meet student needs, teachers are encouraged and, in some cases required, to work together.

This study focused on the everyday realities of teachers' lives as they worked in their classrooms. Using qualitative methods, research was conducted from a phenomenological perspective. In phenomenology, the emphasis is on the subjective aspects of people's behaviors. People define their way of looking at the world, their understanding of reality, by what they say and do. The investigator's goal was to capture the process of the reality created by the participants.

The investigator conducted a pilot study during the spring of 1992 to determine whether the proposed questions regarding the present nature of collaboration were worthy of research and whether observation and interview, two qualitative approaches common in naturalistic inquiry, would be viable research methods. On the basis of on the results of this pilot study, the investigator concluded that qualitative research methods would best answer the following research question: What is the nature of collaboration between general educators and special educators in two elementary schools?

The researcher selected two research sites using the following criteria: (a) Each school had three special education teachers serving the following three categories of students with disabilities: speech and language disabilities, learning disabilities, and mild to moderate mental disabilities, and (b) these two schools were in reasonable proximity of one another, an important consideration discovered during the pilot study because of the unscheduled nature of most teacher consultations. In order to maintain reasonable limits, the researcher selected two forms of collaboration, consultation and cooperative teaching, as the primary focus of this investigation.

Over a period of three and one-half months, the investigator observed eighteen teachers in consultative meetings and cooperative teaching arrangements . Seven teachers were special educators, and the remaining 11 were general educators with whom these seven consulted or co-taught. Using a structured interview format, the investigator interviewed fifteen of these teachers. The change from eighteen teachers observed to fifteen teachers interviewed occurred naturally as schedules changed and unforeseen events occurred. In order to increase the validity of the findings, the investigator conducted a constant comparative study midway through this investigation at two similar schools in the same city. The goal of this smaller investigation was to fill out emerging themes and patterns found in the primary study in order to develop grounded theory based on specific contexts.

Data analysis was ongoing throughout the study. Data from all sources was analyzed and coded, finally resulting in seven categories and 45 codes. The investigator also wrote memos in which emerging themes and patterns were identified and discussed. Twelve themes emerged from the corpus data

Several of these themes focused on the characteristics of collaboration and the meanings and beliefs teachers held regarding collaborative relationships Although writers on the theory and practice of collaboration touted organized, agenda-driven consultation as being the most effective and efficient approach, consultation as it was practiced in these schools was much less formal and more serendipitous. It occurred literally on the run as teachers met in the hallways, in the teachers' work areas, and in brief moments when students did not require the teachers' full attention. The single greatest reason for the spontaneous nature of consultation was the lack of available time to schedule more formal meetings.

Teachers view consultation as an opportunity to discuss-child-centered educational concerns and share information. Teachers believe consultation has been effective, not only when they solve problems, but also when they gain emotional support or a better understand of the student and their role in the student's education. In addition to time constraints, teacher personality and misunderstandings about roles are also seen as barriers.

Cooperative teaching arrangements and teachers' understanding of cooperative teaching are as varied as the teachers who participate in them or talk about them. Collaborative planning time, especially at the beginning, is seen as vital. Teacher personalities were also seen as important considerations in selecting teaching partners. Educators in this study found their relationships with other teachers empowering and useful in gaining insights into their students' needs.

Teachers who are involved in collaborative relationships believe resistive teachers have fears of the unknown. They also think resistive teachers may feel they are overburdened and unable to adequately meet the educational needs of students with disabilities in a general education setting. Special educators have both negative and positive coping strategies in dealing with resistive teachers.

Another important theme centered on the process of change. Educators have learned to be pragmatic about educational change. They are open to suggestions but need to see the results of an innovation before they assume it is effective. Teachers see value in working with one another to improve practice, but without time to plan and time to consult, consultation and cooperative teaching may always be used sparingly.

Although this study was not designed to investigate teachers' beliefs about inclusive education, this topic emerged in the interviews and observations. The process of change was evident as teachers dealt with the ramifications of the increased need for collaboration. Educators understand and support the concept of providing services for students with mild disabilities in the general education classroom. Although generally supportive and open to the possibility of including students with moderate disabilities in general education settings, both special educators and general educators believe these students will need a significant amount of support in these settings. They also want to clearly understand the reasons for providing these services in the classroom.

Teachers face many demands on their time and energy, and the teachers in this investigation were faced daily with dilemmas regarding their role in meeting the increasingly diverse needs of students in their classrooms. Teachers need support and encouragement in meeting these demands. The following recommendations are made in this spirit of support:

1. Schedule time for collaborative efforts by teachers. The general educators in this study had brief periods of time daily, usually no longer than 20-30 minutes, without students. Small chores and errands consumed this time quickly. What they needed were longer periods of time on a less frequent basis so that they could meet with one another to plan instruction and solve problems. The gift of time would be recognized as a support of collaborative models.

2. Provide staff development in collaborative models such as collaborative consultation and cooperative teaching. This study focused on these two forms, but there are others such as peer coaching and teacher assistance teams. All teachers need to understand the collaborative ethic since it is unrealistic for teachers in today's schools to think they can walk into their classrooms behind their students and close the door. They will be closing the door on opportunities for their students' educational growth.

3. Let educators know about the process of change. Becoming familiar with the research on personal change will help educators understand that uncomfortable feelings are

normal during many stages of change. They can be less judgmental and more compassionate toward themselves and others as they begin an innovation.

4. Give teachers both a voice and a responsibility in how an innovation is implemented. Acknowledge their concerns about the bombardments on their time and practice. If teachers are given time for planning, they need to be accountable for implementation of that plan.

5. Be realistic about outcomes. Change in practice, even change that is viewed by participants as good and is supported adequately, takes years to happen. Teachers deal continually with conflicting demands upon their time and energy. It is up to each of them to make sense of the dilemmas these demands created. If administrators and educators can remove the most significant barriers while providing appropriate supports, it is feasible that collaborative efforts will increase in both schools in this study.

## Appendix B

Themes From Dissertation Related to This Paper

1. Consultation is a teacher behavior which is carried on continuously throughout the day. Teachers are constantly under the pressure of time, so opportunities for consultation are grasped whenever possible and scheduled only when absolutely necessary.
2. Teachers view consultation as an opportunity to discuss child-centered educational concerns and share information.
3. Teachers believe consultation has been effective, not only when they solve problems, but also when they gain emotional support or a better understanding the student and their role in the student's education.
4. The lack of time is the single greatest barrier to collaboration, but teacher personality and misunderstandings about roles also interfere.
5. Cooperative teaching arrangements and teachers' understanding of cooperative teaching are as varied as the teachers who participate in them or talk about the concept. Collaborative planning time, especially at the beginning, is seen as vital.
6. Teachers who are involved in collaborative relationships believe resistive teachers have fears of the unknown and are resistant to change. They also think resistive teachers may feel they are overburdened and unable to adequately meet the educational needs of students with disabilities in a general education setting. Special educators have both negative and positive coping strategies in dealing with resistive teachers.
7. As teachers experience more collaborative models, their perceptions change. Their questions and concerns also change, and new ways of thinking emerge.

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